

View From The Center

By

Steve Sears

A friend said the words to me. I didn't need to hear them, but digested them anyway.

“If you haven't been to Martell's, you haven't been down the Jersey shore.”

Folks, Martell's Tiki Bar in Point Pleasant is well known. If you've been there, you've been THERE – if you know what I mean. Located right on the boardwalk, it's various bar areas, inside and outside, with different offerings, the furthest bar being out over the Atlantic, where the waves crash at the shoreline and recede, appearing as if they are taking your legs out from under you.

Wait a minute; what I am telling you for? You probably know all about it, most likely (how about definitely) have experienced it!

One September Thursday, chilly night though it was – and probably more so by the water -- it was time. I put Breeze Radio on in the car, and down the Garden State Parkway we went. The Jersey shore has a different atmosphere in the off-season. In the summertime, you need a "shorehorn" (not "shoehorn" -- play on words here) to get folks in and out of Martell's. I was banking on the early off-season being less crowded.

On this cool evening, with gray clouds that eventually gave way to sun and sunset, we entered at our leisure. We were adding our footsteps to the millions who had left their's on the worn boards at Martell's, but we must've looked lost. This was a universe of sushi,

raw shrimp, indoor dining, and many deck bars, and people congregating with drinks in their hands. Where in the world would we sit?

“Are you guys gonna have food,” asked a female server. We nodded. “Sit anywhere,” she said with a smile, “I’ll be your server.”

We chose a small white table on the Pier Deck, one that matched the many others lining the length of the pier. This time of the year, the beach belongs to the gulls and other shore birds. A gaggle lounged on the beach to our left.

Our server, Jessica More – all pleasantries and smiles – handed us the Tiki Bar menu, all the offerings apropos for a deck evening at Martell’s. The urge was strong to have a beer, but I was driving, so a diet soda it was. Stefanie and Lucille wanted soup, so the female Searses ordered Manhattan clam chowder. For food, we all eyed the sandwiches. Should I get my fave, a cheeseburger? I also had my eyes on an Italian Sausage Sandwich. A few years back, I had phoned a friend who, unbeknownst to me at that time, was at the Tiki Bar.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked, “Guess where I am? At Martell’s, eating a sausage sandwich!”

That did it – not. I also had my mind set on a BBQ Pulled Pork Sandwich or a Cajun Chicken Sandwich with cheese and bacon. I was counting on Jessica to choose for me.

“You tell me which one to order. I can’t choose – put it down and don’t tell me.”

She sidestepped my suggestion. “You can’t go wrong with any of them.” She then went on to describe my three choices in detail. The picture she painted was perfect...but I had to – just had to – go with the sausage sandwich. How could I be on a Jersey shore boardwalk and NOT have one?

“Great choice,” she said with a smile. My wife ordered the Tuscan Wrap, highly touted by Ms. More. Stefanie had a Crab Cake Sandwich on roll. I added a basket of French fries, which was accompanied by a cheese dip, to my order.

While everything else on Jenkinson’s Pavilion may have been open but somewhat quiet, Martell’s was bustling, and getting busier. People were obviously stopping in after work. There were lovers, young and old, heading out to the furthest deck to watch the waves rush back to shore beneath their feet, and feel the breeze in their face.

Even families were represented. A young couple, the wife wearing a Wildwood sweatshirt, entered with their young son, no more than a year and a half, and sat behind us. I wondered if the couple were regulars pre-child, and had come to enjoy, or relive, the experience again. It reminded of when my daughter Stefanie was around the tot’s age; we had taken her to Point Pleasant back in 1991 and stopped for some boardwalk pizza. As she ate her soup that day out of a thermos my wife had prepared, a few businessmen in the eatery with us asked her how it tasted.

I then had a thought. If I and my family *hadn’t* come here this nip-in-the-air Thursday, my “now” Jersey girl daughter may have eventually become the first and *maybe only* Sears ever to visit Martell’s, should she and her friends so choose to on a drive down the shore. Perish that thought!

The sausage sandwich was superb. Italian sausage, topped by roasted green and red peppers and onions, perfectly aligned in the long roll. The fries were great; the basket was empty now. Stefanie and Lucille had enjoyed their food as well.

Our meal at an end, we exited, sidestepping bargoers and nearby heater fans keeping the customers warm and, as I did so, I pondered what I'd just accomplished. I even said to Jessica, "My first time here – and I'm 47 years old."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They tell me that, unless I got to Martell's, you've never been down the shore – correct?"

"That's right," she responded, smiling again.

I had finally – finally – been to Martell's.

As we drove the Parkway home, I said to Stefanie, "Hey Stef, did you know that unless you've been to Martell's, you've never really been down the shore?"

"Really?"

Really. Now all three of us had.